

**“GOD’S LAW IS NOT BURDENSOME”**

John has been telling us that the way to be assured that our faith in Christ is genuine is to look for three important fruits of Spirit-worked faith in our lives: the presence of self-giving love; the practice of obedience; and the confession of sound doctrine. Up to this point, John has, for the most part, treated these tests separately. But in this passage he shows how they are interwoven with each other. In these verses, John tells us that *those who believe in Christ love others by keeping God's commandments, and he also shows us that God's commandments are not burdensome for those who have been born of God.*

We begin our study of this passage by looking closely at what John says in the first half of verse 1: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.” The first thing to point out about this statement is the tense of the two verbs in it. The first verb, “believes,” is in the present tense, while the second verb, “has been born,” is in the perfect tense (in Greek, the perfect tense is essentially a variation of the past tense). The reason why this is significant is because it tells us something very important about salvation. It shows us that regeneration, the point when a person is “born again,” precedes faith. A person is saved by first being regenerated and then being enabled to believe in Christ. Contrary to what many people think, you are not born again as a result of your faith in Christ. The Bible does not teach what some have described as ‘decisional regeneration.’ It does not say that the way to be born again is to believe in Christ. Of course, when the gospel is preached, people are called to repent and believe in Christ.

They are not summoned to be born again. This is because we are entirely passive when it comes to regeneration. We cannot do anything to make ourselves born again. We cannot regenerate ourselves. It is something that God has to do in us. And for this reason, the only people who will respond to the gospel in faith are those whom God first makes alive in Christ.

When you stop and think about it, it has to be this way. If it were not, no one would be able to be saved. Fallen man is dead in his sin. No one is able to place their faith in Christ unless they are first born again. We have to be made spiritually alive before we are able to respond to the gospel in faith. This is what Jesus meant when he said to those who did not believe in him, “you do not believe because you are not part of my flock.” [Jn. 10:26] In other words, a person does not become a member of Christ's flock by believing in him. It is actually the other way around. Believing in Christ is evidence that a person is one of those whom the Father has appointed to eternal life.

This doctrine emphasizes the monergistic nature of salvation. The word ‘monergistic’ means that there is only one person doing the work. The opposite of monergism is synergism, which means that two people are working together to accomplish something. The fact that we have to be born again before we can place our faith in Christ means that we cannot do anything to contribute to our salvation. It is entirely God's work. We are saved by grace alone. This is what John is saying in verse 1. He is telling us that faith is evidence of the new birth. Placing your faith in Christ is the consequence of regeneration, not the cause of it.

The next thing to point out about the first half of verse 1 is what John says we need to believe about Jesus. It is not enough to have a generic faith in Jesus. We need to believe specific things about him. We have to believe that he is “the Christ.” Let’s take a few moments to unpack what this means.

As you may know, the name “Christ” is not Jesus’s last name, but his title as God’s anointed one. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew title “Messiah,” a figure who was foreshadowed by Israel’s offices of prophet, priest and king. Therefore, to believe that Jesus is the Christ is to place your trust in him as the supreme prophet, priest and king for his people.

To believe in Christ in his role as prophet is to believe that he reveals God and his plan of salvation in the fullest possible sense. The only way anyone can come to know God is through the revelation that comes through Jesus Christ. Because of this, all of the other religions of the world are false religions. They are an offense to the one true God. God does not look upon the adherents of cults and non-Christian religions as people who are at least taking a step in the right direction. God makes no promise to bless people simply because they are generically religious. All religion that is not the one true religion is idolatry. Those who seek to know God through anything other than Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the gospel are only bringing more wrath upon themselves.

To believe in Christ in his role as priest is to believe that he offered himself up as the only sacrifice for sin. His atoning death satisfied divine justice once and for all for those who place their trust in him. And because of this, Jesus is the only way of salvation.

There is no other provision for the forgiveness of our sins. As Peter said before the Jewish Council in Acts 4, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” [Acts 4:12]

To believe in Christ in his role as king is to believe that he is the rightful Lord and ruler over all people and all things. One day, he will manifest his kingly glory for all to see, so that every knee will bow before him and every tongue will confess that he is Lord. But until then, his glory as king is hidden from our view. It can only be seen with the eyes of faith. For this reason, placing your faith in Jesus means declaring your allegiance to him as your king. It means acknowledging that your life is not your own, but that it is to be lived under the protection and rule of the king of all creation.

This is what it means to believe that Jesus is the Christ. But this is not the only thing that Christians believe about Jesus. We also believe that he is the Son of God, as John says in verse 5. Jesus was not merely a great man, though at his incarnation he did become fully man. Jesus also was, and is, and always has been the one and only Son of God. He is a divine being, the second member of the Holy Trinity. This is an idea that is just as scandalous today as it was back in the first century, when the Jews who refused to believe him responded to his claims by seeking to find a way to kill him, because he was “making himself equal with God.” [Jn. 5:18] The claim that Jesus is the unique Son of God is a stumbling block for many. It is a claim that sounds utterly foolish to the world. It is an idea that is rejected even by many who claim to believe in Jesus, including

Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. Nevertheless, it is what true Christians believe.

Jesus is the unique and eternal Son of God.

After talking about faith in the first half of verse 1, John then turns to talk about love. He tells us that those who truly love God will love his children. If God so loved his children that he sent his only Son into the world to die in their place, then those of us who claim to love God must love his children as well. Christians love their fellow Christians. Admittedly, this is not always an easy thing to do. Christians are far from perfect. Like anyone else, there are times when we can be hard to love. But even when that is the case, we have to remember that God has chosen to set his redeeming love upon his children. And if this is so, then we certainly have no right to withhold our love from them.

In verse 2, John says something that might sound surprising to us. He says, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments." In light of what John said back at the end of chapter 4, we would expect John to say the opposite of this. We would expect him to say that the way for us to know that we love God is by the love that we extend to others. Our love for God is proven by our love for our fellow Christians. This is certainly true, but it is not what John says here. Instead, he says that the test of whether we love others is our love for God and our obedience to his commandments. This tells us something about what it means to love other people as God would have us love them. It shows us that God defines what love really is. It is possible to love other people in the wrong way. We see examples of this wrong kind of love all around us. Nowadays, many people think of love

as always standing by your friends and being supportive of them, even when you disagree with them or think they are doing the wrong thing. It is a concept of friendship and love that has been inspired by television programs like "Friends." People think that love means saying, "I'll be there for you" no matter what. But the Word of God confronts this notion of what love is. This passage tells us that we are only truly loving others if our first and foremost commitment is to love God and keep his commandments. And this means there are going to be times when we have to side with God against our friends, perhaps even against our own family members. Love of God must come first, or else all of our other loves will become disordered. As the church historian Bede once wrote, "Only someone who is on fire with the love of his Maker can be said to love his fellow humans in the right way." In our sin, we want to love on our own terms. But God tells us how he wants us to love. The way to be sure that you are loving others rightly is to love God first, and to demonstrate your love for him by seeking to do what is pleasing to him.

In verse 3, John says something else that might sound surprising to us. He writes, "[God's] commandments are not burdensome." Keeping God's law is not a burden. We might wonder how such an assertion can be reconciled with some of the things that the apostle Paul has to say about the law. After all, it was Paul who wrote the following: "The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me" [Rom. 7:10]; and "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse" [Gal. 3:10; NASB]? Paul certainly seemed to see the law as something burdensome, at least in the passages just cited. How, then, can John say that it is not burdensome?

The answer is found in the larger contexts of those verses I just quoted. Paul explains in Romans 7 that the law itself is not the problem; our sin is the problem. The law is holy and righteous and good. And because it is righteous, it exposes our unrighteousness. The law is a terror to us because of our sin. But once sin has been dealt with, once our sins have been imputed to Christ and his righteousness has been imputed to us, the law is no longer a problem for us. On the contrary, it is a great blessing to us. It shows us the path of life, the way of blessedness.

The world sees Christianity as burdensome because it sees God's law as something that is restrictive of human freedom. People do not want to live as God tells them to live; they want to do things their own way. They see Christianity as a matter of do's and don'ts, and they want nothing to do with it. But this is not how the regenerate heart sees God's law. The law is not burdensome to us because we know that it is God's revelation of what is pleasing to him. And because our wills have been renewed, we want to please God. Thus, the law of God is a wonderful guide for us. We can join with David in saying, "I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart." [Ps. 119:32] The law shows us how to live for God, and there is nothing that should be more important to a Christian than that.

Of course, no one can keep the law perfectly, not even those who have been born of God. Christians still sin. Nevertheless, not even this is enough to make the law a burden to us, because we know that we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the

righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins. He has fulfilled the law for us. And because of this, we are no longer under the law's curse.

This is very freeing. But there is also a sense in which it puts our faith to the test. We all want to say that we are chiefly concerned with pleasing God. But this passage provides us with something that we can use to examine our hearts. What is your attitude towards God's law? Is it your delight? Is it a guide for helping you to know how to live to please God? Or is the law a burden to you? Is it something that you would rather not think too much about?

Let me give a concrete example of what I am talking about. Now be warned, this is going to be a hard-hitting example. It is probably going to make you uncomfortable. And even if it doesn't, odds are the only reason why it doesn't is because this particular example is not something near and dear to you. Okay, you have been warned, so here it is. As you know, one of the ten commandments has to do with observing the Sabbath day and keeping it holy. And as you also know, the National Football League schedules the bulk of its football games to take place on Sundays, the Christian Sabbath day. (Do I have your attention?) Now, in case you are really worried, let me say this. I am not going to get into whether the Sabbath law should be interpreted to mean that Christians need to abstain from participating in these kinds of leisure pursuits on the Lord's Day. Some of you would probably find such a notion to be odd, or perhaps even offensive, even though it is the position of our Westminster Confession of Faith. Still, I do not want to get into that. And even if I did, I would tell you that, as some of you know, I am

personally inclined to think that the Westminster divines went beyond Scripture in their teaching on this matter.

What I want you to think about is this: Are you willing to allow God's law to speak to the matter of how you spend the Lord's Day? Are you willing to look to the law to be your guide in setting your priorities for this day? Or are you unwilling to give much thought to this because you are afraid of the changes that you might feel compelled to make? Do you simply want to keep things the way they are because you enjoy them that way?

Now, as I have tried to make clear, I am not saying that to be a faithful Christian you have to stop watching Sunday football altogether. I will say, though, that a person who makes that decision because of his desire to please God is certainly paying great honor to God. Still, that is not my point. I am simply trying to get us to think about what John is saying about God's commandments not being burdensome. If your chief goal in a particular area of life is to please God, then the law will not be a burden to you, even if it directs you to let go of something that is important to you. You will not feel threatened by the law. You will not be worried about how it might restrict your freedom in that area. You will actually want to think about the kinds of questions that I am asking here about the Lord's Day. But if in a certain area there is something else that is more important to you than pleasing God, you can be sure that the law will seem burdensome to you.

So much for that. Now let's look at what John says in verse 4 to support his assertion that the law is not burdensome. He says, "For everyone who has been born of God

overcomes the world.” In this context, the term “world” clearly refers to anything that would lead us away from God. The world is opposed to keeping God’s commandments. The world sees God’s law as burdensome. And it is always trying to turn God’s people away from the path of righteousness. Christian obedience requires us to fight against the world.

But John says that Christians have overcome the world. As he has done previously in this letter, he speaks in the past tense, even though the battle rages on. And the reason why he does so is because Christ has already won the victory for us. Our victory in the fight against the world is certain when we trust in Christ because he has already overcome the world. Our power to conquer comes from outside of ourselves. It comes from Christ. As Calvin puts it, “faith receives from another that by which it overcomes the world.”

Notice, also, that even though John places such a heavy emphasis upon Christian obedience in this letter, verses 4-5 make it clear that he upholds the supremacy of faith every bit as much as the apostle Paul does in his letters. Works are important, but they are always to be understood as the fruit of our faith.

This passage shows us that the law of God has a vital role to play in the Christian life. The gospel does not offer us what Dietrich Bonhoeffer once described as “cheap grace,” a pseudo-grace that would purport to wipe away the penalty of sin without actually setting us free from the ways in which sin enslaves us. Instead, the gospel drives us outside of ourselves to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and this grace sets us free from our

**Sermon on 1 John 5:1-5**  
**An Exposition of John's Epistles, # 15**

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obsessive focus on self and enables us to turn outward to love others by delighting to do  
God's will.